

## THE MYSTERY OF THE “NORTH OF THE NORTH” IN IBSEN’S WORKS

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It is an exaggeration to claim that *several* of the protagonists in Ibsen’s dramatic works are from the north, or have lived there. Of all Ibsen’s dramas, only *Vikings at Helgeland* and *Lady from the Sea* are “set” in the North; of the characters Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm* and Hilde Wangel in *Master builder* are from the North, and vicar Straamand and his wife in *Love’s Comedy*, doctor Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* and both Eilert Løvborg and Thea Elvsted in *Hedda Gabler* have lived in the North for a period of time and have returned or are returning from the North in the beginning of the play.

The few characters in Ibsen’s drama related to the North are, however, given a special emphasis in his works. They are, like the landscape and the light of the North, mysterious, strange, strong and untamed, as Hjørdis in *Vikings at Helgeland*, Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm* and Ellida Wangel in *Lady from the Sea*. Or, they have been exiled, suppressed or forgotten – and then suddenly arrive unexpectedly and challenge the established order and open new tension and ambition – like doctor Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*, Eilert Løvborg and Thea Elvsted in *Hedda Gabler* and Hilde Wangel in *Master builder*.

Ibsen only visited Northern Norway once, on a trip to North Cape in 1891. His only experience of the “North” before that was actually of Central Norway such as Trondheim and Molde.

The North in Ibsen’s dramas is accordingly just fiction, imagination – and an expression of the general *Southern* Norwegian understanding of the “others” living in the North and the “otherness” of the North. Especially people from the North of the North, such as Finnmark, who represent a mysterious, bewitching and magic power like Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm* and the foreign sailor in *Lady from the Sea*. This is explained by the magic nature of the North, such as the midnight sun, the Polar light or the overwhelming and irresistible winter storms over the sea.

But Ibsen has also given other clues for the understanding of the mysterious characters from Finnmark, the “North of the North.” These clues are related to the cultural otherness of the characters.

### **Northern Norway has been a multi-cultural part of Norway**

Northern Norway has traditionally and historically been a multi-cultural part of Norway. We have at least 3 cultures, which are today represented by 3 official languages, the majority Norwegian (bokmål), northern Sami (Davvisámegiella) and a North Norwegian variant of Finnish (Kven or Kvääni). Hålogaland Teater, The University of Tromsø, the town and municipality of Tromsø as well as the county Troms are officially bi-lingual – Norwegian and Northern Sami. If we go further northeast to Finnmark many municipalities are today officially tri-lingual (Norwegian, Northern Sami and Kvääni), such as Alta / Álaheadju / Alattia, Porsanger / Porsángu / Porsanki, Tana / Deanu / Teno and Vadsø / Čáhcesuolu / Vesisaari. Others are officially bi-lingual (Norwegian and Northern Sami), such as Nesseby/Unjárgga, and some municipalities with an undisputed Sami majority

proudly have Sami as their first official language, such as Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino and Kárášjohka/Karasjok. Some municipalities further to the south even present themselves with the unofficial Lule Sami, such as Tysfjord/Divtasvuodna. Others have not been that proud and happy to be Sami, such as Kåfjord/Gaivuotna, or willing to accept a Sami minority and a Sami past, such as Bodø/Bådåddjo.

To understand this confusing and still rather tense relationship between the 3 cultures of the North of Norway, we can actually find some important clues in Ibsen's dramas and other writings.

In the dramas, the clues are few and hardly noticed. But they are important. The first clue is in *Rosmersholm*. Rebekka West's original family name was Gamvik. Gamvik is the name of the northernmost municipality and settlement or village on the European continent. No one on the North American and very few others on the Eurasian continent live further north. The name Gamvik gives obvious allusions to the sami *goahti*, in Norwegian *gamme*, or in Finnish and Swedish *kota/kåta*, the traditional peat covered dwelling of the Sami.

The other clue is in *Lady from the Sea*. Wangel names the foreign sailor as a *kven* – as a descendant from the Finnish immigration to Troms and Finnmark in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries.

In other words, Ibsen underlined the strangeness of Rebekka and the foreign sailor by hidden and open allusions to a Sami or a Finnish origin. In the Norwegian language, history and mentality these two cultures, the Sami and the Finns, have been mixed and the general reference to Sami is and has since the Viking age and the Sagas been *Finn* – as in *Finnmark*.

The Swedish and Finnish equivalent for Sami is *Lapp* or *Lappi* in the meaning of *Wild man*. And the wild man with loincloth and club is still represented on the official shield for Lappland in Sweden – and Lappin lääni in Finland.

Even today the Sami *siidas* or administration communities covers most of Northern Scandinavia and further into Northern Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Some *siidas* cross national borders (Lehtola 2004).

### **The Sami and Finns in the sagas and pre-history of Norway**

Ibsen's understanding of the Sami or Finns and in general his understanding of Northern Norway is an expression of the new interest around 1850 for the sagas and the pre-history of Norway. The young Ibsen was interested in and fascinated by the "North of the North" and its pre-history. For his first writings he chose Brynjolf Bjarme as his pseudonym – this is an open reference to Bjarmeland or Bjarmaland, the name of the land "North of the North" in the sagas.

His knowledge of the Sami was, however, limited and rather confused. In *Vikings at Helgeland*, from 1858, there is no relation between the *place* of action, Helgeland in the Southern part of Northern Norway, and the *action*. The wild and strange Hjørdis is not associated with a Northern or Sami mythology, but with Nordic mythology from the southern part of Norway and with strong relations to Southern Europe. The dramatic end of the play is *Oskoreia*, the wild ride of the dead, headed by Hjørdis. This wild ride, lead by *Herlekyn* – or the devil, has been known in Southern Europe since the early Middle Ages.

It appears that Ibsen had no knowledge of Snorri's sagas of the Norwegian kings, *Heimskringla*, when he wrote *Vikings at Helgeland*. The time of *Vikings at Helgeland* is underlined as "i Erik Blodøxes Tid" (in the time of Erik Bloodaxe) (HU IV, 29). According to *Heimskringla* (Sturluson 2011) at the age of 12, Erik Bloodaxe started a career in international piracy as a Viking, and after several years, he ended up in the "North of the North", in Bjarmaland and Finnmark. In Finnmark he found his wife-to-be, Gunhild, daughter of a local king at Helgeland. Gunhild told that she was in Finnmark to learn witchcraft or *seiðr*<sup>1</sup> from two Sami (or Finns as they are named in the saga). By the cunning help of Gunhild the two Finns were killed by Erik's men and Gunhild then married Erik (Sturluson 2011, 60).

Erik Bloodaxe was one of the sons of king Harald Hårfagre ("Fairhair") who according to the saga, united Norway in the year 872. All later kings of Norway had to be a descendant of Harald Fairhair. The problem was that he had a lot of children with different women and Erik got his added name, Bloodaxe, because he tried to kill all the half brothers who refused to accept him as the supreme king of Norway. One of Harald Fairhair's many wives was Snøfrid Svåsesdatter, daughter of the Finn Svåse (which in the sagas means Sami). He actually lived at Hadeland, the landscape just northwest of today's Oslo. 3 of the 4 sons of Harald and Snøfrid later became vice-kings for Hadeland and the neighboring region of Ringerike (Sturluson 2011, 55 – 56). One of them, Ragnvald Rettilbeine (Straight leg), was vice-king of Hadeland. He was according to the saga also a *seiðman*. This is important information because he actually was half Sami and his grandfather, Svåse, we are to understand, was a Sami king or chief. The Norse *seiðman* is equivalent to the Sami *noaide*, the shaman, which also means chief or head of a *siida*, the Sami administration unit. According to the saga, Eirik Bloodaxe burnt his half-brother Ragnvald Rettilbeine and 80 *seiðmen* (Sturluson 2011, 62) – or in other words, *noaidi*, or Sami chiefs.

This story is interesting because it suggest that there were two different peoples in Norway in the early Viking Age. Not only in the North, but also in the South of Norway we had a Sami or Finn population in addition to the Norse population and a condition for establishing a Norse or Norwegian kingdom in Norway was to burn or drown the Sami leaders (the *seiðmen* or *noaidi*), destroy their leadership and the *siidas* - and expel the Sami people. When Eirik burned Ragnvald Rettilbeine and 80 *seiðmen*, he not only murdered his rival to the Norwegian throne. He also exterminated all of the leaders of what we can understand was a rival Sami or Finn kingdom in inland Norway and northern Norway.

### **The "Norwegian school of history" and its theory of immigration to Norway**

The opening story of *Heimskringla* is the story of the immigration to Scandinavia from the land east of *Tanakvisla*, or the river Don (Sturluson 2011, 3 – 8). A burning issue in the 1840s and 1850s was the so-called "Norwegian school of history" and its theory of immigration to Norway.

This theory was first presented in a lecture in 1828, the year Ibsen was born, by the new lecturer of history at the University of Oslo, Rudolf Keyser. He published

<sup>1</sup> *Seiðr* was the Old Norse term for a type of sorcery including both divination and manipulative magic (DuBois 2009 and Price 2002). It has been associated to a shamanic context.

the theory in 1843 in *Om Nordmændenes Herkomst og Folke-Slægtsskab* (On the Origin and National Kinship of the Norwegians)(Keyser, 1843). The theory stated that Norway, as well as Northern Sweden, had been populated by people from the north. Denmark and Southern Sweden had, however, been populated from the south.

This theory was in accordance with the works of one of the founders of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters, Gerhard Schøning, such as *Afhandling om de Norskes og endeel andre Nordiske Folkes Oprindelse* (Treatise on the Origin of the Norwegians and some other Nordic Peoples) from 1769 (Schøning 1769).

Peter Andreas Munch, pupil of Keyser, developed this theory further. In the first volume of *Det norske Folks Historie* (History of the Norwegian People)(1852) and in *Om den saakaldte nyere historiske Skole i Norge* (About the so called new Historical School in Norway)(1853), he stated that the two groups of immigrants to Norway, the Northern and the Southern, had different approaches to liberty.

One of Ibsen's first duties in the Scandinavian Society in Rome was to give a speech at the unveiling ceremony for the monument of P.A. Munch 12 June 1865. In this speech Ibsen mentioned Munch's theory of the immigration to Norway – and commented on the Danish reaction to and criticism of this theory (HU XV, 387 – 392).

Ibsen thus knew the theory of the new historical school in Norway, already in 1857, when he wrote his only theoretical article, "Om Kjempevisen og dens Betydning for Kunstpoesien" (On the Heroic Ballad and its Significance for Literary Poetry) (HU XV, 130 - 152). Here Ibsen underlined and developed further the north-south opposition of Munch. Ibsen also gave a rather detailed discussion of Munch's theories about the Nordic-Germanic people's first homeland and migration and about the heroic epoch of the Nordic-Germanic people. Ibsen used Munch's theories to prove his important point that the Heroic Ballads had their origin in the pre-historic past when the Germanic (or Teutonic) people were living on the great plain in front of the Ural mountains. In this pre-historic period the main distinction of the heroic ballads was established – between the Germanic people – and the peoples living in the mountains to the North, named by Ibsen as the Tschudi (Tsjudi) and the Finns.

According to Ibsen the Tschudi and the Finns were the enemies of the Germanic people and knew the art of melting metal for making weapons and jewelry. Ibsen therefore claimed that the Tschudi and the Finns are the dwarfs and the trolls of the heroic ballads and folk ballads. He supported his claim by the description of the dwarfs as small, sly and malicious ("smaa, listige og onskabsfulde") and this, Ibsen pointed out, fit well to the Tschudi or Finns, ("passer godt paa Tschuderne eller Finnerne") (HU XV, 149).

For Ibsen, the distinction between the Germanic people and the small, sly and malicious Tschudi and Finns, established already in the pre-historic past, was continued and kept up in the folk ballads after the Germanic immigration to Scandinavia. And Ibsen also underlined that the indigenous people, the Finns, were still living in the mountains of Norway even into the southernmost areas ("lige til den sydlige Grændse") (HU XV, 149). The indigenous people were the trolls and the dwarfs of the folk ballads ("Visernes Trolde og Dværge") (HU XV, 149). The heroic

ballads are therefore the poetic glorification of the original pre-historic conflict between the Germanic people and their enemies, the Finns.

### **The myth and the mystery of the "North of the North"**

The myth of the Finns, which means the Sami, as the dwarfs and trolls of the folk ballads and folk mythology – and Ibsen also underlined that it was a myth – is the background of the mysterious "North of the North" and the mysterious and dangerous people living in the "North of the North" in Ibsen's dramas. Ibsen, even though generally accepted as a man fighting for liberty and against superstition, prejudices and myths, in his theoretical article on the heroic ballad and in his later dramas, actually supports the myth and the mystery of the "North of the North".

Behind the myths and mystery of the "North of the North" – is also a brutal reality and a long, well known, but still suppressed history, since the time of Erik Bloodaxe, on how the Finns, the Sami, have been burnt or drowned as seiðmen or witches.

In a study of the persecution of witches in early modern Finnmark, Rune Blix Hagen (1999) at the University of Tromsø, found that despite few inhabitants, the county of Finnmark had not only the worst persecution of so-called witches in Norway, but also amongst the most severe witch-hunts in Europe during the 17th-century. 91 were burnt as witches in Vardø. Most of them were Sami. This witch-hunt was a suppression of the Sami based on a superstition or myth, which Ibsen actually accepted in his theoretical writing and his dramas.

In Ibsen's contemporary times, in 1852 – five years before Ibsen wrote his theoretical article, – there was a Sami riot in Kautokeino against Norwegian authorities and tradesmen. The leaders of the riot were executed and their skulls were examined at the University of Oslo, as well as at universities in Sweden, to support the claim that the Sami belonged to an underdeveloped race of humans.

When we know of such strong, well-established superstition, even within science, it is no wonder that Sami people well into the 1960s were asked, in full honesty by decent inhabitants of Oslo, if they had a tail. The superstition reflected in Ibsen's claim that the Finns (the Sami) are the trolls of the folk mythology have been long lasting.

In recent times the Sami have not been killed or openly oppressed, but they have been suppressed culturally through assimilation into the Norwegian language and into modern culture. They are accepted as a minority and have their own parliament and university college. They are now "normalized" and are no longer the mysterious "others".

But their culture and history has been suppressed and neglected. The facts accepted by the Norwegian school of history and repeated by Ibsen, - that the Finns or Sami lived in Scandinavia before the first Germanic immigration to Norway, - has later been disputed and neglected. The Sami are understood as newcomers and intruders and most Norwegian archaeological theories are today based on the presupposition that the first immigration to Norway came from the south, neglecting the fact that the oldest stone age rock art, the first stone age settlements as well as the oldest stone age culture (the Komsa culture), are found in Finnmark, the "North of the North".



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### Summary

It is an exaggeration to claim that *several* of the protagonists in Ibsen's dramatic works are from the north, or have lived there. The few characters in Ibsen's drama related to the North are, however, given a special emphasis in his works. They are, like the landscape and the light of the North, mysterious, strange, strong and untamed. Or they have been exiled, suppressed or forgotten – and then suddenly arrive unexpectedly and challenge the established order and open new tension and ambition.

Ibsen only visited Northern Norway once, on a trip to North Cape in 1891. His only experience of the "North" before that was actually of Central Norway, Trondheim and Molde. The North in Ibsen's dramas is accordingly just fiction, imagination – and an expression of the general *Southern* Norwegian understanding of the "others" living in the North and the "otherness" of the North. Especially people from the North of the North, such as Finnmark, who represent a mysterious, bewitching and magic power, like Rebekka West in *Rosmersholm* and the foreign sailor in *Lady from the Sea*. This is explained by the magic nature of the North, such as the midnight sun, the Polar light or the overwhelming and irresistible winter storms over the sea.

But Ibsen has also given other clues for the understanding of the mysterious characters from Finnmark, the North of the North. These clues are related to the cultural otherness of the characters as Sami and Kvääni.

**Keywords**

North, North of the North, Norwegian school of history, immigration theory, Sami, Kvääni, seið, trolls.